

## VERONICA DAUPHINE

Thursday. It is here too fast. It could not have arrived more slowly. I've been sitting here, waiting, for nearly fifteen minutes. Actually, I don't think I'm allowed to call it 'waiting.' Or 'sitting.' I was too early, on purpose. I've forgotten how to be still. At what point is this impatience valid? On Thursdays, my body either speaks in fidgets or she does not speak at all. I've lost track of the habits and patterns that I know of. I'm certain there are ones I haven't even noticed. Right now, I am tapping the pads of my right fingertips together, pressing my fore, middle and ring fingers against the fleshiness of my thumb. My lips have already twisted to one side, making way for my front teeth to gnaw at the inside of my cheek. Thirty years from now, I will probably have developed the mouth wrinkles of a smoker. Note to self: get more retinol.

10:02. I crack the four knuckles of my left hand with its thumb, and then crack the thumb itself. Twice. I don't have the wrong day.

Her face appears at 10:03, her smile and a delayed "Good morning!" follow suit. I smile back, exhale, wave hastily. My scalp itches furiously, and now I've begun pressing my fore and middle *fingernails* into the pad of my thumb to stop myself from reaching up. It persists.

My gut burns bottomless. One ankle rotates on its own, the foot flailing, and I look at everything except the tiny screen. I cannot believe I'm talking about the weather right now, of all things. What do I care about rain? I have had zero desire to be outside in months. Somewhere deep, inner Me is sweating and shaking her head at this outer Me, appalled at how we're simultaneously talking fluff, about to rip out our hair, smiling, and fighting the urge to cry. I'm saying something about how my mood depends so pathetically on the days getting longer and the sun being out more—though not in so many words. I casually throw in a joke about the distress of realizing that my outer arm is the same shade of watery melanin as my inner arm. I smugly, gratefully bask in the genuine laugh that I knew such a comment would yield. Like the joke, the laugh is full of understanding. Now, I'm listing fun warm-weather activities that I "can't wait to do!" I think we both know, I can wait. And only one of us knows that I hate, *hate* small talk. Clueless, the other plays along.

Thursday means I'm suddenly too scared to jump into whatever is really on my mind, into whatever finds me impatiently fidgeting in front of a dark screen, early on purpose, every week. There is always a whatever, but I have yet to muster the courage to start a session with, "Actually I'm not feeling fine. I'm not doing well. I'm not really improving." I don't know why. Maybe it's the stubborn fear that I should be ashamed to ever—always—show up panicked and bursting at the seams. *Go back. Strike the "don't" and the "maybe."*

I'm a mess of shredded nerves, but I'm waiting to be coaxed off this cliff, not pushed. I think she can sense my unwillingness to jump. Not five minutes in, she has already nudged and keeps nudging. "How are **you** feeling?" "How **are** you feeling?" "How are you **feeling**?" My responses are curved, diagonal, and sometimes back-handed. I justify my cowardice by telling inner Me that I'm waiting for *the* question. Maybe she won't ask it. I've made sure that we haven't

talked about it in a while. I've willed it to the edge of most of our conversations, and it has stayed there. I've been so, so careful to not say anything that might alert her to this forgotten footnote that is now glaring at me, unavoidable like a roadside flare at night. I've been—I **am**—terrified of the judgment. But today, this need outweighs that terror *just* enough. Today's whatever feels so big that I can't breathe. I need to let it out, but I need her to ask about it first. It's like I need permission to unravel. *Girl, strike the "it's like."*

Truthfully, this therapist and I are...comfortable. Not in a bad way, but also not in a great way, either. She offers help, I accept it, I leave feeling a little lighter than when I came in. I get to feel good about the fact that I go to therapy. This comfort zone, I call it the Skits. On my end, every session plays out like it's been scripted. I know exactly what I'm supposed to say, so I do. If I see the option to either project self-awareness or to get down and uncomfortable, then I pick the first one. I'll wax poetic about "remembering to ground myself" or how I'm trying to "give myself grace—" instead of detailing the paralyzing anxiety that often leaves me unable to do even the simplest tasks. Never mind the parts of me that seemed fixed one day, but come rushing back, broken, several Thursdays later. I don't like to be broken. I don't cry, I don't lie. I always tell a truth—I just never touch the kind of truth that makes me want to crawl under the table and die. I let myself be real about *some* things, like the many insecurities that come with getting serious in my first-ever real romantic relationship. That helps me avoid getting *real* about deeper ones, like the deep fear that people will discredit me and my feelings and my activism because my boyfriend is white. Not only have I never mentioned that last detail, I also haven't brought up the paranoia that everyone closest to me is judging me about it, or how I feel like I'm betraying my race.

"That's really good to hear. Okay..." She pauses. Checks notes. Flips a page, goes back in time. A little more... Good. *Oh, God.* "So. In the past, you've brought up your romantic relationship with..." she scans the page, and my armpits prickle. "Max. Tell me how that's going. Is it going? It's not something you mention very often."

"Well...That's...it's..." I realize that I've been twisting and untwisting my kitchen for God knows how long. The once-loose cloud of coils that I took such care to oil and comb out last night is now a mass of little knots, the scalp beneath them raw and sore. I wince as I undo my own handiwork. I shut my eyes. Even now, I want to play it off.

"Actually..." my right hand reaches up again, to search for something to fiddle with. They follow the chain of my gold necklace to the hollow of my throat, near its centerpiece. At this level of anxious, one would think I'm about to sing the national anthem to a stadium of fans—not finally, truly get uncomfortable with my therapist. All my senses tumble out of my control as I try to force my mouth around the words. I need to say them. *Say it. Say it!* "Uh..." I close my eyes for a beat. Then another. Reopen them. She has not disappeared. My right hand squeezes. "...Yeah...Yes. It's going. But—"

*Snap!*

The cold metal slithers down the inside of my shirt, skims my belly, and pools in my lap. I glance down at the shiny heap. My limbs, already icy, go numb. My lips, already moving, go forward.

“...I think he’s about to break up with me!” There. I said it.

It seems so small on this side of my head. Out here, it is loudly not fact, just a feeling. Such a small thing to have nearly passed out over.

My fingers find the two golden V’s in my lap. A tear falls and joins them.

*Thank GOD this is a virtual session.*

### **AURÉLIE BENOIT**

The eternal summer is unbearable. I don’t know how long I can stand it.

We arrived on the island only months ago, in the middle of April or so, when the sun was not yet at its hottest. The beach was absolutely breathtaking: the sand was white and soft as the clouds in the sky; the water, the same bright, clear blue as the eyes of my Léopold. On that last day of sailing, I stood on the deck and faced the sun and the roaring waves and received them both with open arms, closing my eyes against the salty spray. I turned my back to the ocean and faced the small island as it grew large, and we grew close. A horizon of green hills and gray mountains went far back, rolling into each other and out to the unknown. The Spanish territory must have been somewhere that way.

We came here on behalf of France. Well, Léopold did. I suppose I represent it too, by proxy. A world ago, he was commissioned to settle here as an official liaison between our homeland and its richest colony. I am the liaison’s wife. He is here to watch over the production and export of coffee and sugar—two French staples that apparently grow very well here. I was surprised to learn that this infernal, unforgiving territory could somehow also yield such valuables. Before our arrival, there had been talk of how the only way to make sure the crop actually gets shipped to France, where it is most needed, is to supervise from the moment the seeds enter the ground. Our travels to this island-colony could not have been timed more perfectly; there is only tension and whispers of war in our wake. This land seemed to be a paradise. After having only imagined myself into the striking postcards sketches, into the poems that I savored back home, that small, stunning corner of shore on that very first day was a dream. Beyond a dream. But only then.

From the ship, we were to be transported to our new “home.” I expected a carriage, at the very least. What arrived was unworthy of being called a cart. With us aboard, it rumbled and rolled through the bustling center of the town, bound for the dwelling for which Léo had paid ahead to purchase and to furnish. I had not prepared for so much commotion, nor had I known we would have to be in such close proximity to these strange, very dark people so soon. They did not even

try to hide their interest, staring wide-eyed as they milled about the cart as though it was just another body in their midst. There was yelling everywhere, of everything—greetings, arguments, prices in a strange, thick French. Piles of vividly colored produce and groupings of strange, domesticated beasts were among the too numerous sights to see. The way became narrower as the bodies and the disregard for the cart grew denser. People began swarming, shouting at us as we slowed to a standstill at the center of the cramped square. It brimmed with so much activity that it spilled over, nauseating. I supposed it was the closest thing to a French *place* that these people could manage.

I whispered to my husband. “What is the name of this place?” he leaned forward and called out my question to the skinny, very black cart driver. Like Léo, I had just assumed that the strange little man spoke French. I could not fathom the possibility of speaking anything else.

“This is called Le Cap, *Mesye*.”

I pressed in closer to Léo. Too-bright colors and layered odors seemed to fit the strange art, fabrics, housewares, and food that people had brought to sell. All of the clutter was somehow piled on top of even more trinkets and food items. I could only process fragments of anything, everything, at a time. Vivid blood-reds, the sharp tang of unknown mingling with the perfume of roasting meat, deep blues, a spice that smelled of fire, striking woven squares of grass and other primitive accessories, the stink of a crowd of squalling goats. Bodies, so many bodies that only heightened the taste of salt in the air. A frenzied rush of people rippled into the cart and it suddenly felt as though I was on the ship again. I pulled my skirts in tighter and pressed a handful of my own shawl over my mouth and nose. I breathed in the cleaner salt and the faint whiff of home. I prayed for as much distance as possible to be planted between myself and that place.

Our dwelling is more “house” than home. It is imposing and whitewashed, but still whitewashed with salt. Everything either creaks or smells faintly of ocean. There are no real fineries, save for the few essentials Léo sent ahead. There are no sweet smells or lavish corners. Am I to squeeze a sense of refinement out of rough, bare mahogany? Compared to the other dwellings on this property, this house certainly wields power. But as a home, which is meant to reflect one’s livelihood, status and worth, as much on the outside as in, it is...plain. Practical. I need flamboyant.

On that first day, after the months upon months at sea and the madness that was the squat little port city, the home looked glorious in its solitude. I was pleased at how it faced the ocean, and that it was high up enough on its hill that I could see the blue-white shore from my bedroom. Behind it, there was full, green space that seemed to stretch forever. That first day was paradise.

Léopold left on business a few hours after our arrival; he needed to ensure that the land would be prepared to accommodate these young sugar and coffee farms as soon as possible. I

watched him leave, a spot of bright white linen floating down the hill. I feel as though I haven't seen him since.

It is November now, and there is nothing new or glorious about this hell anymore. The eternal heat is enough to melt the skin from your face. There never seems to be an off-season, which I suppose is excellent for the crops and insufferable for me. Despite all that we have sacrificed, given to these people, it is apparently also up to the French to teach them about seasons!

I slept terribly again last night. Lying somewhere between sleep and wake in the stifling master suite, I watch the morning sun play amidst the curtains. I am wheezing, fighting the humid air. I reach for the necklace at my throat, the last piece of true finery I have left. Grasping its two golden V's, I lightly run my fingernail along the ridges of its diamonds. It is caked with grime and sweat, but even in its ruin, I cling to the belief that it is the most beautiful thing I have left. The chain is simple and understated, but the centerpiece is so finely crafted that it can catch even the faintest light. Its two solid-gold, partially hollowed V-shapes are layered into one unit. Each wide V's hollow is filled with tiny diamonds, ranging from a center stone that is barely bigger than my pupil to the two barely-there points of light at each end. An engagement present from my mother, years ago, I hardly ever take it off.

I lift the bronze bell from my bedside and wait for Roseline. *Mother*. I've thought of her constantly, of late. It is sometimes all I can do, as I wait for sleep to never arrive. What would she think of me? How would she react if she could see me like this? I am filthy. I have neither social life nor standing. I am suffering. I sigh and shift again. I rub my rounding belly. I do not feel motherly in this place.

"*Wi, Madam?*" The brown girl suddenly appears at my side, and I start. I never hear her approach, never feel her presence, though she is usually meters away. "Roseline, how many times must I tell you—?!" I reach anger quickly now, as I am paranoid that my authority carries less and less weight. Dutifully, though, she lowers her head and looks apologetic. I take that moment to look at her more closely. She cannot be much older than I, but like most of the slaves, she has only thrived in these terrible conditions. She bears a cloud of that strange, woolen hair beneath her white headscarf. Her face is darker than the rest of her, but it is smooth and deep. Pretty enough, I suppose.

"*Eskize m.*" Her French is thick, heavy as the air around us.

"Send for my husband." I spit the words. "And bring me water. Chilled."

Roseline nods and is gone, soundless. I settle back into the hot linens, close my eyes. I try not to move, save from reaching up to peel my necklace from where it is stuck to my hot skin. If I have my way, we will get away soon. Maybe forever. The paradise has become my prison.

**ROSELINE**

Freedom is coming, but not for her.

I ignore the first part of her command. I will not send for the Monsieur. He will not leave his work. I have been tasked with doing so before, and each time was more of a gamble than the last. He used to come running to tend to his wife. But the longer he has lived here, the more he has understood. He has realized what he is in this place, and it has been sickening to watch. He knows what land means here. He knows the value of a family name that will be linked to an endless supply of precious, coveted goods for years to come. He does not know that there are not many years left for him to enjoy it.

On the long walk to the cellar, my hand reaches to grasp the ring that is tied around my neck, hidden among the folds of my garments. It was a gift from my husband, to commemorate the “wedding” that we hastily threw together, two years before the new master arrived. Back when the talk of true revolution was barely a whisper. To this day, I don’t know where the ring came from, nor have I been able to ask. Over the span of that same two years, my husband has not been here in Le Cap. Instead, he has been living in the shadows of the mountains. He has been preparing a place for me.

*Maybe he traded for it.* I hold up the gem as I pass beneath a spot of sunshine. I want to see it again: the way the ice-blue stone and patterned silver band reflect the brilliance of this, my homeland, all at once. *He could have bought it. Or stolen it.* My fingers stroke the design that surrounds the stone. *Maybe he plucked it right off the pinky of some haughty, heat-stricken Frenchwoman.* I join the others in the kitchen and pause to help clear the dishes from breakfast. Tucking the ring back to safety, I smile at how fitting that last thought is for my Emmanuel. Those diamonds that ladies like Madame wear? They could never replace this.

Of course, my husband and I are not officially married. These tyrants have steadfastly refused to recognize our unions, though some precede and will outlast the French’s time on our land. Few people know of mine, and none of them also live and work here on the Benoit property with me. They are also away, living in the shadows and safety of the mountains and beyond. They, too, are helping to prepare a place for us. Until it is ready, we must serve to live and pretend to live to serve. To this new authority, I seem as much a part of the household as the curtains in the bedroom—loyal and compliant and always useful. They do not know that I am the wind. I soothe and relieve on my own terms, and sometimes not at all. I am always around but may not answer when called. And, just as the wind moves through those curtains, I am just passing through.

I finally reach the shallow dirt cellar where the cooler, cleaner well water is stored. Kneeling beside it, I can remove the drenched scarf from my head and steal a moment of relief before I replace its discomfort. I unlatch and lift the heavy, swollen wood doors that guard its

wares. Painted-on tar cleaves to my hands in the heat, but I let it rest there and stain my fingers as I carefully feel the underside of one of the door corners. Nothing new, just the same, seven deep scratches that were here the last time I checked. Those scratches tell time in a way I do not understand—is he counting down or counting up? *It is no matter*, I tell myself, swinging this door the rest of the way open to retrieve one of the larger pitchers of clean water. He told me that when it's time, I will know. *He will send for me.*

I squat, then lift the heavy vessel out of the pit. It is not always easy to remember that the revolution is coming. I start back toward the house, stopping only long enough to readjust my hold. I must remind myself, the others, of this every day in order to keep believing. I take comfort in knowing there *are* others, and even more in never knowing who amongst us will strike the first blow. The shadow mountain ones have spies everywhere. I have reached the kitchen again.

For now, though, I must answer the Madame's call for chilled water. I must be a dutiful curtain that can only sway and reach so far before it is pulled back into place. I wonder if I will still be here when the child arrives. I pity them both. One day, soon, when she demands something of me, I will leave to tend to it. But I will not look back.

### **DIANE BENOIT (NÉE BENOIT)**

“Honestly, Sam, that amount is more than I was expecting. Thank you so much!” I momentarily mute the call so I can release a loud exhale of relief. Sam goes over a few extra, likely important details in my ear but I have stopped listening. I don't care! The deal has been finalized. The buyers have closed, and the papers are being signed. The property is finally off my hands!

This calls for celebration! I unfold myself from the confines of my desk chair and head toward the half-bottle of Masseto that's been waiting in the fridge for two weeks, since the virtual happy hour that my department hosts every month. On my walk to the kitchen, I text Eli and instruct him to FaceTime me as soon he gets my message. “Don't worry. Not an emergency. But it's about the beach house,” is all I will give him, for now. Is that too cryptic of a way to prep one's ex-husband for the news that one has sold his tacky West Palm Beach house? Maybe. *This information feels too important to spell out through text*, I tell myself in my most level-headed inner voice. *Well, that...and I really want to rub his face in it.* After all, it's only bad news for one of us. I refuse to even be associated with that property anymore. Or its neighbors.

As I sip and scroll through my phone, reaching over and swiping past the unattended notification gets more difficult as I let the time stretch on. I know that it's a voicemail from my son. A badge on my screen since Thursday morning, I already know what it says. I've had to keep the ringer on silent as there have been *so many* congratulatory calls, texts, emails—for three days now. Max sent the first photo, a FaceTime screenshot. I answered immediately with a ❤️ and tons

of x's and o's. Veronica texted next, with many thanks and a similar photo that had been snapped from her point of view. I waited a beat before sending my "Congratulations!!!!!!!" and throwing in a few 🥰s. To the messages that have flowed in since, my responses have all included copious amounts of bouquet emojis. I've expressed my thanks, though the congratulations are not even for me. I've had no hand in any of this, the whole relationship. He made it clear from the start that parental approval would not be a deciding factor this time around. All I did was resize the ring.

*But I've been silent. He's going to wonder.*

I pour myself another glass of the Italian red and scroll to the three-and-a-half year old photo that is hidden in my phone. I've looked at it more in the past year than I would ever admit out loud. There are no faces in the photo, but two joined hands. The larger hand is supporting the other, showing it off, holding it up against an exquisite background of turquoise water and dazzling, white sky. The other hand is more slender and manicured, a little orange around the knuckles—probably from the self-tan that I recommended before they took this trip. Otherwise, it is tastefully bare, save for my 7<sup>th</sup> great-grandmother's ring. The ice-blue stone and patterned silver band shimmer in the sunshine.

By the way, the ring was a perfect fit on the first try.

I swipe back to Vee's photo. In her texts, she had thanked me for the "beautiful ring!" but I was surprised to see that mine was not the only gem on her left hand. Two others, a ruby and a dull amethyst, adorn her left fore and middle fingers. Both are set in *gold* bands. A bit flamboyant, honestly. Not to mention, impractical. *And hasn't anyone told her never to mix gold and silver?*

Later, she'd flashed all three in her private Instagram posts. One of them, a FaceTime shot of her grinning at her hand on the camera, and Max smiling back, was captioned "Almost as blinged out as Thanos!" I don't even know what that means. What's a Thanos? I gulp another swig of red. *God. I hope she doesn't ruin the official engagement photos. And who's paying for the wedding announcement?*

My phone chimes in my hand. Eli's name appears, with a text. "YOU DID NOT." Rolling my eyes, I reply. "1) You know how I feel about that place, especially recently. And 2) I am not discussing this over text!" I chug more wine.

Returning to my internet stalking, my inner self stabs me with guilt. *This is not about me.* I repeat the words over and over, just as I have all year. And just as I have all year, I don't feel any closer to believing them. Personally, I'm not a fan of how they met. I have to keep reminding myself that it's hard to find love at all. These two did it in the midst of a pandemic! They fit together, according to what Max tells me. She levels him out, in a way that I have never seen. My son proudly swears that she's smarter than he is. She has spent this past year prepping graduate school application portfolios, to start working toward her third degree. Thank goodness she's

beautiful. Well, pretty enough, I suppose. The wedding photos could really be stunning. And the grandchildren...

I need to stop torturing myself with this. Veronica is not Madeleine. Perhaps I should start repeating *that* to myself. I sigh into my empty glass. *Why couldn't I have had a daughter?!*

I message my ex-husband, realizing I'd forgotten something.

"By the way, our son is engaged again. We need to contact our lawyer. Call me back!"

## VERONICA DAUPHINE

So... clearly, I was wrong.

In my defense, the necklace had a weak spot. The soft gold chain had been wearing down for a while now, right where it was welded to the end of the centerpiece. As a rough sleeper with a history of breaking her mother's necklaces, I *knew* that. I should have been better at remembering it. And second, this anxiety makes me expect either an unattainable best or the absolute WORST.

I'm just not sure where this absolutely *gorgeous* ring falls on that spectrum.

Don't get me wrong; I'm overjoyed. I'm so excited!!! I've been smiling for days. The proposal happened on Thursday, during the pre-planned FaceTime date that Max had been so serious about planning, and I had been so nervous about attending. It was thoughtful, both socially distant and virtual, *and* it included food!!! I cried. And this time, the tears weren't only a result of the extra-spicy shrimp Pad Thai. My man gets me.

But, there is still one last hurdle to clear. It could either go really well, or really destructively. It involves most of the anxiety that drives my Thursdays. And the paranoia, shame, and fear of judgment that drives that and every other day. And both of these heirlooms, actually.

I have to call my mother. And I'm worried about what she and Dad will say.

I love my parents dearly, but they weren't the first loved ones I told after I hung up with Max last Thursday. I sent a photo to, then called, my older sister. We screamed a lot. Then we cried. Then we got serious, and proceeded to brainstorm. *HOW should we tell Mom and Dad?*

I've kept them updated this entire year and a half, especially when things started to get real. I've also had to dodge some serious bullets along the way. Once, my mom called me on a Sunday afternoon, in the middle of brunch. She asked what I was doing, and I told her. There was silence. Then she asked, "What church does Max go to?" My armpits prickled, but I'd been prepared for this. I'm always waiting for the fight it might spark. "He...doesn't, actually." I finally said. "But we're working with that. In fact," I glanced at him across the table and smiled. "We just came from mine."

In the household I grew up in, there was never a *real*, constructive conversation about what we, as women, can do with our lives outside of making sure we've gotten a stellar education and a steady job. Instead, there has only been half-talk about what we *should* do. The expectation has always been that we will simply follow our faith and "tradition," though the latter has also never really been laid out, but somehow must never be questioned. All I know for sure is that we are expected to build our homes out of modest, conservative Christian values, submit to our husbands, and be sacrificial, Godly wives and mothers.

I am strong in my faith. I am modest, but I am no conservative. I have worked too hard for all that I've earned to just hand the controls over to a man the moment I marry him. I'll move the world for our kids, but I will enlist whatever outside help it takes for me to keep doing this work. I am keeping my last name. Max *knows* all this. If he didn't, I would not have said yes.

I just have to get my mother to see and to know this. And tell her about the necklace.

I start the WhatsApp call. While I wait, I drape the body of the necklace over the fingers of one hand, and the chain glints beneath the glare of my ring light. I search for the broken spot with the other, inspecting the minute, square-linked design. Starting with the tiny clasp, which is still intact, I trail the long line of smooth gold until I reach the point where the chain has given way. Even in two, I think this necklace is one of the most beautiful things I will ever own. The chain is simple, but the centerpiece is so finely crafted that it can catch even the faintest light. Its two solid-gold, partially hollowed V-shapes are layered into one unit. Each wide V's hollow is filled with tiny diamonds, ranging from a center stone that is barely bigger than my pupil to the two barely-there points of light at each end. Thirty-three diamonds in all.

She answers on the third ring.

"Hiiii." Great start.

"Hey." It sounds like she's chopping something. I can hear the telephone church service in the background. Someone is singing *A La Yon Zanmi Se Jezi* really loudly. "How are you?"

I tell her I'm fine, answer her questions about the virtual church service I attended, and then jump right into it. I start by announcing that I have news. Some of it is really good and the rest is kind of really bad. Before she can choose, I start with the latter. As I speak, I forward the photo of the necklace that I took earlier in the week. When she asks, I lie and say that it broke in my sleep. I truthfully tell her there had been a weak spot in the chain, and then apologize for not being more careful. Then I rush on to say that I'm already taking care of it. I told Max and he told Diane and she knows some kind of expert, a fellow faculty member in her department, who can fix it. A Dr. V-something. Vivian? Vever?

"Hmmm." Silence. *Chop, chop, chop*. "How much will it cost?"

I turn my head away from the phone and exhale in relief. I've been forgiven. Although there could be, there is no fight. No challenges or follow-ups. The worst part of this news is over.

"Not much...?" I have no clue, but I don't care. I'll pay whatever.

"Okay." The chopping stops. The church is still singing over the phone. "That's fine. And what is this good news?"

"Uh..." I close my eyes for a beat. Then another. Take a deep breath. Reopen them. I dig a fingernail into the pad of my thumb, and prepare my cheeriest voice. Then I jump.

"Max proposed! And I said yes."

### **IRMA DAUPHINE (NÉE AUGUSTE)**

It is broken again. Many things—strong and clumsy baby fists, errant combs that were pulled too hard, fitful sleeps—have broken it before. It will get fixed again. I have had it since after my engagement, long before our wedding. The gift had no special ceremony. Just a beautiful, old piece in a beautiful, old box that Manman Véronique handed me one day. She would be pleased to know that I have done the same, even though I did not await the occasion of engagement. Even though she and the grandchild who received it are eternal strangers. When I asked Manman Véronique how long it had been in the family, she could not answer me directly. All I would learn is that her mother had given it to her. It seemed that each daughter or daughter-in-law could have asked the same question to each mother, but had never thought to record the answer for each daughter that followed. How many generations had heard the words "my mother gave it to me." How many mothers? Who was the first?

In the case of the engagement ring, which Max showed us weeks ago, the answer is seven. Seven mothers and eight daughters, apparently, and this ring and its records had followed them all. A rare heirloom, he'd called it. Then he asked us both for prayer and faith in what he was preparing to do. Her father would not have given a blessing if he'd asked. I don't know why she has chosen him, honestly. I don't know what this means for their future, their souls. But I will not worry. They are in the Lord's hands now.

### **ROSELINE**

The day does not start out as The Day, but instead like all other days. There is no anticipation or preparation the night before. I find it is better to not hope for anything in that way, lest I disappoint myself with an unattainable best or an absolute worst. This morning, I woke up and acted like the curtain. I waited on the Madame. I bathed baby Diane. I went to the cellar to fetch chilled water.

When I am ready to close the wooden doors of the cellar, I feel for the grooves and expect nothing. It has been at a steady seven marks for many months, since before Baby Benoit arrived. Today, there are nine grooves; one that is added to the group of seven and another one that slashes through them all, halving them. I don't know how, but I know. It is time.

I turn and run back. I go all the way inside the Benoit house, and *that* is the decision that nearly undoes me. But I need something, anything, of value. I will only be traveling with food, the clothes on my back, and my ring. In order to go further, more safely, I need money. This house has always been full of fineries, some worth more than we Haitians can even fathom, but these items in the main areas of the house are all on too much display. A candleholder will be too obvious if it goes missing from the table, and someone else is likely to suffer greatly for its absence. The fine laces and linens that line the many tables are too pristine, and again, too obvious. The same goes for the silver, the drapes, even the smallest silk pillow.

As I float from room to room, appearing to straighten and tidy as I go, Sabine finds me, relieved. "Oh, good. Take this." She thrusts Madame's baby at me, and I quickly shift to receive the heavy bundle of sleep. The child still smells sweet from the bath I gave her this morning, more so now as the smell of soap mixes with the sweeter scent of milk. "She is fed and fresh," Sabine assures me. "But she is heavy. My work is not done well with babies tied to my back *and* my front. As though I do not have enough to endure?" She laughs and places a hand on her very round belly, and I am suddenly sad that I will miss this delivery.

"Madame sent her down this morning with the instruction that we should not bring her back if she was awake. She looked like a zombie, the poor devil." Sabine continues. I am bouncing up and down now, absently, just to keep the baby in this state while I think of what I should do. "We convinced her to bathe, too, just so we could take and replace the bedclothes. Now she is asleep. How lovely that one of us mothers could actually get some rest." Sabine sucks her teeth, long and tired. "Anyway. Take the baby back up for me, eh? I have to finish with these linens so I can hang them." She does not wait for an answer before she has waddled away.

And then she is gone. Diane fusses, so I bounce some more, a few times up and down on each step of the staircase. I make sure she is fast asleep before even getting close to the Madame's door. The room is mostly dark, as the curtains are drawn. Madame is snoring away near the far wall. I do not worry. I have already removed my shoes and can make it to the child's bed with no issue. I've done it countless times. My feet know these floors well, and soon the baby is resting soundlessly between her mother and the wall. I touch her little cheek in a goodbye.

I turn a slow circle so that my feet do not touch any more floor than is necessary. I straighten, and that is when I see it. A small pile of gold, a bit of chain hanging off the edge of the dresser that it rests on. The Madame must have removed it for separate cleaning while she bathed, which is surprising. She hardly ever takes it off. Without hesitation, I painfully test-and-step my way to the dresser, praying for favor and forgiveness the whole way. It will carry me all the way to Emmanuel. To freedom. To the revolution.

My right hand slides the necklace into my cupped left, and I slow-turn my body again. The door is just to my left. I am quietly celebrating being mere meters away from leaving this house forever... when my right foot comes down on a fatal spot of mahogany. The creak shouts. Madame starts, half awake. "Hello?" she calls sleepily. "Who is there?" My limbs turn to ice.

I am paralyzed, caught in the shadow between the dresser and the wrong side of the open bedroom door. The fear of being discovered is what keeps me upright. My right hand reaches up again, searches for something to steady itself. Its fingers follow the length of rough kitchen twine down to the hollow of my throat, where the ring hangs at the center. I feel her presence awakening as she rolls over and begins to sit up in the bed. "Léo? Is that you?" I close my eyes and pray to disappear. Reopen them. I'm still here. As my left hand tightens around the gold and diamonds, my right hand squeezes, then pulls.

*Snap!* The twine gives way and the ring starts to fall. I catch it.

My heart breaks that I cannot save it. I have to save myself.

Quickly, I raise my arm high and snap my wrist forward, awaiting the loud *cling-clang* that I know will divert her gaze. Silver clatters and echoes against mahogany, and her head turns toward that opposite wall. If she looked back, or even saw me, I do not know.

## **DIANE BENOIT**

I loosen the drawstrings on the small pouch that Max left in my mailbox last night. It's from Veronica, along with a short note of thanks. I shake the broken gold necklace out into my cupped left hand and study it closely. I have seen it on her countless times. She hardly ever takes it off. I shudder. *Two wide, partially hollowed V's. Thirty-three diamonds total. Square-linked chain.*

I swivel my desk chair to face the fire-proof safe in the corner. I try to remember which section holds copies of the older family records.

## **VERONICA DAUPHINE**

We've been engaged for almost a full week.

Before our world shut down, the craziness of both of our respective schedules made it so that we couldn't see each other in person every day. The pandemic didn't change that very much. We had been going steady for around six months when the first wave began. After talking it out, I realized how much I *didn't* want to take the plunge of one of us packing a suitcase and heading to the other's place to quarantine together. I wouldn't have been comfortable doing it even if the virus didn't exist. Both our jobs could still be done from home and were just as demanding as the in-

person work had been. He liked his solo apartment. I liked my roommates. Coffee-hour work calls and Netflix Party dinner dates made do, for nearly a full year.

This past week, we've seen each other nearly every day. After church on Sunday, we swapped out the many congrats and messages that were happening on social media, for movies, charcuterie boards (mine looked better!), and wine. We had long work sessions on Monday and Tuesday that had mostly been free of conversation. I needed motivation to get through one last round of grad school apps, and he needed a buddy to work while he proofed some kind of complex research report. Five straight hours of emails, document drafts, coffee-sipping sounds, and minimal check-in chit-chat? Bliss.

This afternoon, I'm tearing up a lot as we both Face-Time his maternal grandparents to share out news. Two adorable, little old French people showering you with love and blessings is a lot to handle on any occasion. But I'm thinking about the one grandparent I've ever heard of and can name, even though I never got to meet her. I think about the language barrier that might have stopped us even if we had met. I can only say a few words in Haitian Creole. Yes, I speak French now, but she might not have spoken it. I didn't start learning until I was a preteen. I'm also getting married to a white man who is of *French* descent. Would she reject me for that? Would I have even been able to know her? Would she have wanted to know me?

As Clothilde and Quentin try not to spill their wine as they show "zee caméra" the label of whatever they are currently drinking, I text Max. "Our kids are going to know where they come from. Starting with their grandparents." I watch his eyebrows go up when he reads it, and I giggle.

That's usually how our deeper conversations start. One of us will text such declaration, and drop a bomb of a question, and the other simply say: "Sounds like it's time for a \_\_\_\_ talk." So far, there have been many faith talks (my idea); several allyship talks (his idea); regular mental health check-ins (both); discussions about breaking generational curses (both, but mostly me); ideas on how to bridge cultural gaps (both, but mostly him); and race talks (both). To him I have mentioned only some of these complex feelings and fears about what it means to date him, a white man. The rest, I'm not yet sure of how to articulate.

It's now 11pm for the cute French grandparents, so they send air kisses and wave goodbye. Max and I stay on. I duck my head to dab my eyes with a tissue. "I've said it before, and I will say it again. Being that adorable should be illegal!"

He's laughing, but he studies me through his screen. "Those weren't all happy tears." He says, finally. It isn't a question. "I take it you called your mom?"

"No, they weren't all happy." I sniffle. "And yeah, I did. It was rough. And it got weird. They don't like this, but kept telling me 'it's up to you, it's up to you.'" I lean into the camera and shoot him a look " Though I would have appreciated the heads-up that my parents already knew!

I could have gone in with a different game plan!” He holds up his hands in sheepish apology, not sorry at all. I laugh and back down. A little. “Have you heard from your parents?”

“I’ve heard about the necklace, yes. She texted that she’s supposed to take it to Dr. V later today.” Max takes a sip of the beer he’s been nursing. “But about us? Nothing. And all I got was a congratulations text from my dad so far. I’m going to try calling him again tomorrow.”

“Ah,” I sigh. I lean back into the couch cushions to stare at the ceiling. “When we’re parents, we’re going to do this so, so differently,” I tell it.

“That sounds like an opening for a generational talk.” Max’s eyes are shining when I sit back up. “Tomorrow, over brunch?”

I tilt my head. “You’re not tired of me yet?” A flirty test.

“Never.” He passes. My stomach flutters. I can’t wait to marry him.

“Good answer. Deal. But after eleven, though. Remember, tomorrow’s Thursday?” I waggle the fingers of my bejeweled left hand at the camera.

“I’m gonna have a LOT to talk through.”